

A Matter of Bad Timing

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Some times the great tragedy isn't that we fail to love, but that we wait too long.

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Author's Note: This is for all of you who didn't think I could write a story with a Naruto and Sakura pairing.

"From this day on I shall guide and protect the village of Konohagakure! For I am the Sixth Hokage!" Naruto happily tossed the Hokage's headpiece into the air as the crowds in the plaza below cheered madly.

Sakura cheered too. She was among the honored few who had been invited to watch the ceremony up close from atop the Hokage Tower. She clapped with all her might and yelled out with all her might in approval. She was so happy for him. She knew how much he had fought and struggled to get this. She could still remember the annoying loud mouth she'd met in her very first day at ninja class.

"My name is Uzumaki Naruto!" He'd shouted out for all of them to hear. "And one day I'm going to be Hokage!"

Of course everyone had laughed at him, herself included. They had all laughed at his ridiculous dream. Everyone knew that the Hokage was the greatest ninja in the village, the one all others obeyed and respected. How could an idiot like him ever be Hokage?

She could still remember looking over at Sasuke and thinking that someone he deserved to be Hokage and that it was wrong for anyone else to try and claim that spot. In that instant she developed a dislike for Uzumaki Naruto. A dislike that had only deepened when he tried to be nice to her. She resented him for no other reason than he was trying to take what should have been Sasuke's. Her dislike got even deeper when he made it clear he saw Sasuke as a rival.

In her mind she came to hate Naruto because he was everything Sasuke wasn't. He was loud even though he was totally lacking in

skill. He was brash, unpopular, attention seeking, clumsy, idiotic, confrontational, and utterly lacking in grace or charm.

And he was Sasuke's opposite in one other way; he noticed her. No matter how she tried to drive him away, no matter how harsh she was he would keep trying to win her over. He would tell her how pretty she was and how smart. He would try and get her attention and ask her out and do anything he could for her. And the more he did the more intensely she disliked him. She saw it as almost a cruel joke; the boy she liked ignored her and the one who was his polar opposite wouldn't leave her alone. She never saw him as anything but an obstacle to her being with Sasuke. She never seriously stopped to even *consider* befriending him. He was the anti-Sasuke how could she possibly want anything to do with him?

It never once occurred to her to consider his good points. That he was committed, that he never gave up. That he had courage and faith in himself even when the odds seemed impossible. That he was honest about the things he felt. That he was compassionate and cared about others. That he was *kind*. She never noticed any of those things about him.

How was I so blind for so long? She wondered.

Now of course everyone knew how amazing he was, not just the village but the whole world acknowledged him. She realized just how amazing he was, and just how blessed she was to have him as a friend.

As only a friend.

Looking at him as he was smiling down at the crowd below she sighed wistfully. How things had changed.

At the formal ball following the coronation Naruto was dancing with every female who asked. Sakura thought it utterly fitting that Naruto's very first dance was with Ayame. She and her dad Teuchi were the

only non-shinobi present and the fact he honored her with the first dance spoke miles about Naruto as a person. He never had cared about status or family name, for him people were always just people. He would stop and chat with a peasant farmer and would also think nothing about calling a Sannin pervert to his face or calling a Hokage old man or grandma. That was just Naruto.

As she watched he danced with Tsunade, Shizune, Ino, Anko, Kurenai, and Hinata. She watched with special interest as he danced with his ex-girlfriend. They had dated for a short time and things had appeared to be going well. Then out of the blue they had decided to end things and remain just friends. When she'd heard that she'd half expected him to come up to her and ask for a date.

He hadn't.

Come to think of it, when was the last time he asked me out? Back at the academy it had been an almost daily occurrence. When they were a part of team seven it had happened less often but still pretty regularly. It happened less and less as time had gone on. She could only remember a handful of date requests after he brought Tsunade back to heal Sasuke and become Hokage. From the time Sasuke abandoned the village until he left to train with Jiraiya she couldn't remember him asking her even once.

The day he returned he had wanted to have dinner with her, but had asked if she would split the bill. She had instantly turned him down. She suddenly realized that was the last time he had ever asked her to have dinner with him. *That was more than three years ago*, she realized.

In that time they had rescued Gaara, gained a new teammate and sensei, fought Orochimaru and found Sasuke. They had spent years trying to save him only to have him laugh at the idea of returning to Konoha and try to kill Naruto. It had taken seeing that, Sasuke actually trying to kill Naruto, for the scales to *begin* to fall from her eyes. For her to begin to understand that maybe the boy she'd admired all along had never really existed in the first place.

Since then Sasuke had become the enemy and they had given up all hope of redeeming him. She had even been ready to kill him, or thought she had. When the moment had come she'd hesitated. Sasuke hadn't and would have killed her if Naruto hadn't been there to rescue her. At that time Naruto had told Sasuke that if they fought they would kill each other.

"Hey Sakura, want to dance?"

"Huh?" She came out of her thoughts to find the Sixth Hokage standing in front of her with his hand extended.

He was smiling with that simple honest warmth he had. "You're not allowed to say no," he told her. "I'm ordering you to dance with me Sakura-chan. I'm Hokage now, I can do that."

Smiling back at him she took his hand. "Hai, Hokage-sama."

Out to the middle of the dance floor he put both his hands on her hips and they slowly began to move to the music.

"I finally got to dance with you," he said gleefully. "One more childhood dream fulfilled."

"If you wanted to dance with me sooner all you had to do was ask."

"Sorry Sakura-chan, I promised Ayame the first dance and the others kind of cornered me."

Sakura laughed lightly. "I didn't mean today Naruto. If you wanted to dance with me before all you ever had to do was ask."

"I did, lots and lots of times, your answer was usually to hit me."

She looked down feeling a bit embarrassed at his blunt reminder of how unfair she used to be to him. "That was back in the academy, things have changed since then."

"Some things have," he admitted.

She looked back up into his clear blue eyes. "Why did you break up with Hinata?"

He lifted a surprised eyebrow. "Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?"

"I just want to know the reason, that's all."

"I broke up with her because I couldn't return her feelings, I'm stuck on someone else. Someone I can never be with."

She looked at him intently. "Naruto..."

"You look very pretty today Sakura-chan," he said neatly cutting her off. "But then I've always thought you were the prettiest girl in the whole village."

She felt her face grow hot and slid just a little bit closer to him.

"Naruto you... you know how I feel, I've told you how I feel about you."

Before setting out to try and kill Sasuke she'd first found Naruto and told him that she loved him and no longer cared for Sasuke. She'd done it to free him from the promise he had made to bring him back to the village for her. She wanted to release him from that burden and give him some peace of mind. She had offered him her heart and asked him to be with her and to forget Sasuke.

He had replied by telling her that he hated people who lied to themselves.

After all his pursuing her she had wound up confessing only to have him reject her.

"I know how you feel Sakura," he said sounding serious while keeping his smile in place. "I've known for a long time now. The truth

is you still love Sasuke, even now, you will always love him. The same way I will always love you."

She felt as if he had punched her in the stomach. "You... you love me?" She asked weakly.

He nodded as though it were no big deal at all.

"Baka! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did, more times than I can count."

"You know what I mean!"

He kept smiling as they continued to dance across the floor, totally unaffected by her anger. "I told you a hundred times how I felt. Are you going to try and blame me because you needed to hear it a hundred and one times?"

"But I returned your feelings! I told you I loved you back! You're the one who turned me down, remember?"

"I turned you down because you were lying to yourself and to me." He said. "I know that you still love Sasuke and that you always will. It took me a long time to accept that but I finally did."

She thought about telling him he was wrong, but stopped herself. She swallowed and spoke again. "Naruto," she said patiently. "Maybe some part of me does still love him and always will. He was my first love and I admit he was very important to me. But the truth is even if some part of me will always love him I *don't want to be with him anymore!* Even if a small piece of my heart will always belong to him most of it is free to love you! Isn't that enough?"

He looked at her sadly and saw his smile fade. He suddenly looked very tired. "It's too late Sakura," he told her. "When Sasuke and I meet again we're going to kill each other, I know that now. Deep down I always believed that I would never die before I became

Hokage. Now that I've achieved that dream I can do what I have to without any regrets."

"Naruto..." she wanted to tell him that he didn't have to die to stop Sasuke. He wasn't even 20 yet, he should have a long and prosperous reign as Hokage. That was what she wanted to say but he again he cut her off.

He was kissing her. Right in the middle of the dance floor. His lips were pressing down on hers and she could feel her whole body consumed with heat. She closed her eyes and kissed him back. She thought for a moment she might melt.

The music and the kiss ended together. When they did she was only just able to keep standing.

"That was another childhood dream of mine," he told her as he lovingly touched her cheek. "I always wanted to kiss you, even just once."

"It doesn't have to be just once," she tried to take his hand but he pulled away before she could reach him.

"Thank you for dancing with me Sakura-chan, I have to go now."

Before she could protest he was gone in a swirl of wind and leaves.

That was the last time she ever saw him.

Two days later he and Sasuke were both dead.

As she laid down a white flower at his funeral service she wondered if all the tragedy and heartache was just a matter of bad timing. When he'd been ready to love her it had been too soon. When she had been ready to love him it had been too late.